

ICPS newsletter®

Primaries are a way to bring voters closer to politics

Since Ukraine switched to a parliamentary-presidential form of government and proportional election system, political parties have become key players in formulating and implementing government and local policies. But, to cope with this level of responsibility and power, they need to be more effective and democratic, which means getting closer to voters at all levels and gaining their trust. Here, Ukraine can make use of the experience of western countries that have long resolved similar problems by forming party lists on the basis of preliminary elections or primaries. As part of the “Lessons in Democracy: World Practice and Ukraine” project, the Centre’s experts analyzed the reasons for instituting primaries, the types and models of primaries, and their impact on political parties

As a result of political reforms adopted in 2004, Ukraine’s parties have become the main players in political competition. They have also become the main focus of public demand for democracy. However, there are three main problems that prevent the country’s political parties from keeping up with the process of democratization.

1. Human resource shortage

The absence of large-scale parties with well-developed grassroots organizations in Ukraine makes the process of organizing an election campaign at the local level much more complicated. Most often, the ensuing shortage of human resources, especially at the local level, results in the random inclusion of people on party lists who later discredit the party’s image.

Except for leaders and some party speakers in their circles, Ukrainian parties have very few competent public individuals or well-known politicians who are capable of bringing their party political dividends.

2. Regionalized and limited voter base

It is difficult for parties that are based on the financial and human resources of specific regions or ideological, dissident

projects to expand their electoral base, to go beyond the boundaries of regions that are loyal to them and become national parties—in short, to stop being parties that represent only one part of the country.

3. Undemocratic and untransparent modus operandi

With the going of the majority electoral system, the human face of individual elected representatives has been hidden behind a party “brand.” Faced with party lists, voters essentially choose a “package deal” and after the election are soon disappointed with the actual candidates who end up in the Verkhovna Rada or their local councils. The closed way in which such lists are formed has further eroded voter trust in political parties.

Primaries can open the party “black box”

Parties face the challenge of opening themselves up to voters and rank-and-file party members and eliminating barriers both within the party, between its headquarters and local branches, and between the party and voters.

International practice shows that one way to resolve these problems is to democratize the process of nominating party candidates to elective office and

to form party lists based on preliminary elections or primaries. Depending on the format, candidates in such primaries can be either rank-and-file party members or anyone who wants to participate, regardless of party affiliation.

On one hand, primaries make it possible to increase the level of voter participation in the formation of government bodies by opening the party “black box” to voters, bringing ordinary people closer to politics, and generating a stronger sense of participatory democracy. On the other, by varying the degree of openness of internal party elections and the way they are held, a party can also resolve its internal personnel, image, management, and even financial problems.

The history of primaries

Primaries are a unique mechanism that was first introduced in the US and had no equal in other countries for a long time. The first law in history making primaries mandatory was passed in 1899. In recent decades, this process has also been used, to a greater or lesser degree, in the UK, Spain and Israel. Italy introduced primaries in 2005 and France in 2006.

The main reasons for instituting primaries are:

- to strengthen party lists in order to win elections;
- to increase party membership and voter support;
- to make the election process more democratic;
- to strengthen the link between a party and civil society;
- the determination of party leadership to reduce the power of mid-ranking party officials.

What kinds of primaries are there?

To understand how primaries can affect a party, its electoral base and the political system as a whole, two basic criteria need to be considered:

- who has the right to vote in a primary;
- whether party leadership can affect the result.

If the vote is large-scale, that is, eligible voters include not only active party members in regular contact with their party organizations, but also voters who are not actively involved in party work in their everyday lives, this is an open primary. If only party activists in regular and close contact with the party are allowed to vote, this is a closed primary.

How a candidate behaves during a primary will also depend on how much party leadership can influence the final result. If the primary process is transparent, that is, clearly regulated by law or party statutes and rules, and party leadership cannot seriously influence the outcome once the process is started, there is no significant top-down impact on the results of such primaries.

When party leaders can change the rules for a primary in process or just before it starts, when they determine the list of candidates to participate in primaries according to their own views, sifting out “undesirable” individuals, these are “primaries under the influence of party leadership.”

No ideal model

The practice of western democracies includes three different models of primary:

- open primaries where party leadership has no impact on the results (the US and Israel);
- closed primaries where party leadership has no impact on the results (Spain);
- closed primaries where party leadership influences the results (the UK).

A fourth “model,” open primaries where party leadership influences the results, is not very widespread, for objective

reasons: if party leaders can manipulate the results, voters will soon become disillusioned with the primary process and stop participating. Needless to say, such models are not long-lived.

European practice demonstrates that there is no ideal model of primary. Although open primaries build voter trust in parties and improve the quality of party lists, they can weaken internal party discipline and diffuse party identity.

Closed primaries where party leadership cannot influence the results have considerable democratic potential. However, their negative aspects include the danger of losing the link between a party and its voters. Rank-and-file party members are often bigger radicals and purists regarding the party line than voters themselves. This is why closed primaries mean that a party will often be unable to respond appropriately to changing public opinion and its leadership will be unable to play the role of a vanguard, offering new, even more moderate, platforms or ideas. Closed primaries where party leadership influences the outcome can strengthen control over the party, but they also threaten that party's democratic image.

An effective political technology

Primaries are an effective political technology that parties need to know how to use. The impact of primaries is not always obvious: everything depends on what model is chosen, how “open” the primaries are, and how strongly the party can influence the outcome.

Using primaries, a political organization can to achieve completely opposite goals: to make its party more democratic or, on the contrary, to strengthen the power of party leadership over rank-and-file members; to increase the role of ideology in the party's identity or, to the contrary, soften its ideological aspects. The main point is to have a clear, proper understanding of how a particular type of primary will affect the party and the political system as a whole, and what limitations each model has. ■

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International budget project takes off

ICPS began to implement the International Budget Project's Open Budget Initiative 2008, funded by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. The goal of this project is to raise awareness among researchers and NGOs of the process of putting together the State Budget and to recommend ways to make it more open. As part of this project, ICPS experts will analyze the level of transparency and accessibility of Ukraine's main Budget documents to voters and how the Budget process in Ukraine compares to best international practice. The main result of this project is expected to be to link worldwide civil society research work on Budget transparency by leveraging individual efforts in each country to draw international attention to the importance of the issue.

Study on public budget auditing released

A study called “The State of and Approaches to Budget Auditing in Ukraine” has been released. This project was implemented by ICPS Senior Economist Olha Romaniuk on commission from the Open Society Institute, as part of its “Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative” (LGI) program. The goal was to survey current practice in auditing local budgets in Ukraine and to find out to how the approach to auditing in Ukraine compares to international standards and global practice. The result was a detailed analytical report that covers the issues of legal and institutional support for public budget audits, an analysis of the level of qualification of internal and external auditors, and a discussion of compliance with international oversight and auditing standards.

The results of this project will be used by the Open Society Institute as a basis for future technical assistance projects in Ukraine. These projects will target budget reform and reforms to current legislation on oversight and auditing, increasing the capacity of local auditors, and studying the best world practice.

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